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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000005

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: FIJI: INTERIM CABINET RESHUFFLE; PEOPLE'S CHARTER
[1](#)V. ELECTIONS

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Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Interim PM Bainimarama has announced the replacement of over half the interim cabinet. The net result is even more of a military, Fiji Labor Party (FLP), and National Alliance Party (NAP) flavor. The stated aim is to rationalize governance; an unstated aim is to reduce frictions among the civilian elements. We expect Finance Minister Chaudhry's continuing major role will ensure frictions continue. The RFMF has named two new spokesmen. The Mr. Outside, RFMF lawyer Col. Aziz, has accented to media and the public the Military Council's role in the interim government, and has made clear that the People's Charter is the RFMF priority, not early elections. The first gathering of People's Charter (PC) participants is to take place Jan. [1](#)16. Significant power centers like deposed PM Qarase's SDL Party and the Methodist Church have refused PC roles. The Aussies and Kiwis are taking a nuanced approach to visa sanctions against PC participants. In general, we hear Australia's new Rudd government has decided to maintain past policies regarding Fiji. End summary.

Major Interim Cabinet reshuffle

[1](#)2. (C) Interim PM Bainimarama finally detailed his cabinet reshuffle on Jan. 4, removing 9 of 17 interim ministers, shifting the roles of others, and adding 4 new faces, a major overhaul. Bainimarama described it as an effort to rationalize portfolios into a compact and streamlined cabinet. The biggest names to depart are Public Services Minister Bune, Commerce Minister Waradi, and Labor/Tourism/Environment Minister Rounds-Ganilau. The newcomers include Felipe Bole (foreign minister in the Rabuka days, a failed NAP candidate in the 2006 elections, now interim Education Minister), Tom Ricketts (a failed FLP candidate in the 2006 elections, now interim Industry, Tourism, Trade, and Communications Minister), Navy Captain Timoci "Lesi" Natuva (until recently the RFMF Senior National Rep in Iraq with BrigGen rank, now interim Works and Transport Minister), and Dr. Jiko Luveni (a long-time UN employee and wife of a retired RFMF Colonel, now interim Health Minister).

Solidifying consensus?

[1](#)3. (C) Observers had not anticipated that over half the interim cabinet would depart, though many ministers have been

ineffective. The net result appears to be a strengthening of the military, NAP, and Chaudhry/FLP bases. Former RFMF Commanders Ratu Epeli Nailatikau (still Foreign Minister but with civil aviation and international cooperation added) and Ratu Epeli Ganilau (shifted from Fijian Affairs to the Defense portfolio) remain. Bainimarama gives up "Defense" and adds "Fijian Affairs" to his extensive responsibilities. Natuva becomes another military face in the Cabinet, though some speculate Bainimarama's motive may be to remove a potential dissident from the barracks. Ganilau's NAP party adds Bole to its cabinet list. The FLP's Chaudhry and Vayeshnoi stay on and are joined by Ricketts. Bune, an irritation for Chaudhry within the FLP, departs. We have heard the Military Council was unhappy with the amount of back-biting in the previous cabinet. The new group of 13 presumably is expected to salute more smartly. Interim AG Sayed-Khaiyum remains and adds Public Enterprises and Electoral Reform. Media have criticized giving the AG additional responsibilities -- that role in the Westminster system is theoretically to provide neutral legal advice -- and have noted a nepotism concern: Sayed-Khaiyum's brother was recently named head of the government radio station, a "public enterprise."

New RFMF spokesmen

14. (C) In late December, when the RFMF's spokesman, Col. Tikoitoga, gave up that role to prepare for a one-year military-college course in India, two officers replaced him: Col. Aziz (the RFMF's head lawyer) and LtCol. Qiliho (Chief of Staff for Land Forces). Aziz handles general policy issues; Qiliho handles straight military matters. Both are already on the U.S. visa-sanction list. Aziz reportedly has

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been instrumental in RFMF efforts to protect military human rights abusers, including those charged with murder, from prosecution. He reportedly has a close relationship to the Fiji Human Rights Commission's Shaista Shameem, and perhaps to Shaista's sister Justice Nazhat Shameem. Qiliho is one of those responsible for intimidating human rights activists just after the coup.

Role of the Military Council

15. (C) In the past few weeks, Col. Aziz has made obvious that the Military Council is playing a key role in the interim regime's governance. He acknowledged that members of the Military Council attend interim Cabinet meetings and that the Military Council provided advice to Bainimarama on who should go, who should stay, and who should be added in the cabinet reshuffle. Reports from within the interim Cabinet had indicated that, in reality, the Military Council, rather than the cabinet, has been formulating policy. Aziz's comments have brought that reality into the light of day.

The People's Charter and elections

16. (C) Late last week, two interim government officials stated baldly that the People's Charter is the priority, not elections by March 2009. At a People's Charter workshop, a senior official in the interim PM's office described the Charter as the military's "exit strategy" that must be in place prior to elections. Col. Aziz told the media that the Charter is "the priority" and the date of the next general elections will depend on how readily people accept and understand the Charter. He said, "The Charter will lay the platform for the election." Bainimarama's office has announced that the oft-postponed first meeting of the National Council for Building a Better Fiji (the Charter process) will take place on Jan. 16. PM PermSec Chand says 13 invitees out of 24 have so far confirmed participation. A few have declined, and others remain undecided, reportedly due to travel-ban concerns. Chand said there are to be 8 nominees from the interim Minister for Fijian Affairs (now Bainimarama) representing the 14 provinces, and 3 reps from

"grassroots people." The IG will appoint 10 of its own representatives.

17. (C) In theory, the Charter process will unfold over the next six-to-eight months, followed by a referendum next October. Bainimarama has repeatedly left the strong impression publicly that he knows the outcome. Though a draft document has been circulating for months, IG officials are now insisting the actual Charter will only come from the soon-to-begin process. If, as Bainimarama has indicated, the Charter will decree a new, all-open-seat electoral system, that outcome could well bring a postponement of March 2009 elections pending the variety of new regulations and new electoral boundaries that would be required. Constitutional challenges in the courts to any such revisions could delay things further. The current Constitution makes no provision for referenda and makes any changes to embedded electoral processes exceedingly difficult to achieve.

Aussie/Kiwi People's Charter visa ban issue

18. (C) We hear that both New Zealand and Australia have informed the IG that they will not automatically extend their visa sanctions to those who take roles in the People's Charter process. However, if the totality of circumstances indicates a person meets on-going visa-sanction criteria (based on closeness to the IG and/or the military) visa sanctions will continue to apply. We hear Australia's Rudd government has committed to continue past Fiji policies, though with a couple of nuances. The Aussie High Commission can now engage at the ministerial level with the IG when necessary. The decision not to automatically apply sanctions to those who participate in the People's Charter process may be another adaptation, though that issue only rose to the surface recently.

Comment

19. (C) We will be surprised if the new interim cabinet line-up brings an end to back-biting. So long as Mahendra Chaudhry is in the mix, he will be working personal and FLP political angles, and some of those angles will not relate well to rigid Military Council perspectives on team play.

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The People's Charter has taken much longer to formalize than the IG anticipated. Major Fiji players, in particular deposed PM Qarase's SDL Party and the Methodist Church, are not taking roles. Some others may have been reluctant to join because of fear of visa bans, but many are suspicious (rightly) that Bainimarama, the RFMF, and the IG have pre-cooked a process that really ought to be the job of an elected Parliament.

DINGER